

STATE

Parole experiment frees 4,174, but overcrowding remains

The Associated Press

MOBILE | Alabama's experiment with increasing paroles for thousands of inmates didn't bring on the crime wave some feared, but it didn't solve Alabama's prison crowding problem, either.

Now the state is running out of nonviolent inmates who are likely candidates for an early release, the Mobile Register reported.

In September 2003, Gov. Bob Riley got the Legislature to create a second state parole board to speed up the release of non-violent felons. Since then, 4,174 prisoners have been released through the second parole board's special dockets.

That's on top of the 1,820 paroled through the normal process and the more than 13,500 whose sentences ended or who started the probation portion of a split sentence.

But nearly two years later, Alabama prisons, work release centers and boot camps hold 23,874 inmates — nearly twice their designed capacity of 12,943.

That doesn't include another 3,370 people who are waiting to be transferred from county jails, are serving time in privately run prisons in other states or are housed in alternative arrangements.

"I don't think anybody assumed that this would relieve the crowding conditions. That's not the intent of the second board," said Donal Campbell, who became Alabama's corrections commissioner when Riley took office in January 2003.

The "second board" is a three-member panel appointed by Riley that began hearing cases in December 2003. The idea was to speed consideration of parole for thousands of eligible prisoners, giving freedom months or

years earlier to those judged to pose the least risk to the community.

One of the first to face the new board was Valentino Arso, a 39-year-old Mobile native serving a life sentence for a 1996 auto theft. The judge meted out such stiff punishment because of Arso's criminal record, which includes convictions on drug and first-degree assault charges.

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The new parole board granted Arso's release in December 2003. He told the Mobile Register that he dove into every prison rehabilitation program he could find.

"During my confinement, I received God into my life. And it changed my life," he said. "I got myself in trouble. I'm not going to put it on anyone else. ... You've got thousands and thousands in there that won't admit their problem."

Now living in Whistler in southwest Alabama, Arso said he is earning his commercial driver's license and hopes to work as a truck driver and give talks to youths. His parole officer, Monica Norwood, said Arso so far has made the grade. His only infraction in the last year has been a fine for failure to have his grandchild in a car seat.

Some academics and advocates maintain that Alabama's prisons — and those in other states — are filled with thousands of people like Arso who can safely be released as long as they have access to the right drug treatment, education and job training programs to break their criminal habits.

Advocates for reducing prison populations said states ought to start early release with the inmates serving time for property or drug offenses. In Alabama, such inmates make up more than 43 percent of the total, according to the Department of Corrections.

"Unfortunately, what we're doing in our country — and it's not just Alabama — is we're incarcerating a lot of people who aren't dangerous," said Robert Sigler, a criminal justice professor at the University of Alabama.

Alabama's governor, a conservative Republican who has long taken a traditional law-and-order stance, would seem an improbable candidate to engineer such a radical reordering of the criminal justice system.

As governor, Riley's foray into prison reform was a matter of necessity. He inherited a corrections system that many experts concurred was badly underfunded and overcrowded. Judges at both the federal and state levels had ordered the state to reduce the overcrowding, and Alabama voters had rejected his plan to raise taxes by \$1.2 billion.

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The state posted a 31 percent increase in paroles from 2002 to 2003. That was the second-highest percentage increase in the nation, behind only North Dakota, according to a U.S. Justice Department report prepared last summer.

Although it was more dramatic in Alabama than in most other states, the increase in paroles mirrors a nationwide trend.

According to figures compiled by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003 saw the largest increase in America's parole population since 1992, which saw a

7.4 percent jump from the previous year.

Lauren Glaze, a statistician with the Bureau of Justice Statistics, attributed the increase to attempts by states to deal with budget pressures. She said they have employed a variety of strategies, including increasing the number of intermediate sanctions and exercising greater reluctance to imprison "technical" parole violators — people who fail drug tests or break other parole rules but who do not commit new crimes.

In Alabama, many of the parolees came out of work release centers where they were working in regular jobs and interacting with the public while being locked up at night.

Cynthia Dillard, assistant executive director of the parole board, said most of the parolees are now working and paying taxes in the private sector.

Of the 4,174 granted early release, the board has revoked parole of 471, either for committing new crimes or violating parole rules. That's a recidivism rate of 11.2 percent.

"It's still unrealistically low. We expect it to go up," said parole board Director William Segrest.

By contrast, according to statistics compiled by the Department of Corrections, 37 percent of all Alabama inmates released in 1999 were back in prison by 2002. Among those released on parole, it was 22 percent.

Parole board officials attribute the early success rate to their selectivity. The problem now for parole board officials, they have run out of likely candidates for early release.

"We have considered everyone in the prison system. Now we're concentrating on the backlog of violent cases," Segrest said.